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REGENTS' EXAMINATIONS IN GERMAN¹

By FREDERICK W. J. HEUSER

IF EXAMINATION-PAPERS have only the purpose of ascertaining a pupil's knowledge, it would be idle to spend much time over their discussion. But the teacher is consciously or unconsciously influenced by them in his work and led to stress those points which he sees most frequently presented. From this point of view a careful scrutiny of examination-papers will indeed repay us.

In general, it may be said that there is a vast improvement noticeable, when one compares the papers of June 1919 with those of June 1909. That improvement, which on the whole has been steady and progressive, is really indicative of a general improvement in modern language instruction in the High Schools of New York State and particularly of Greater New York. Two factors have more recently interfered with a steadily ascending curve, so far as actual attainment was concerned. One was the distracting influence of the war on both teachers and pupils, the other the very noticeable elimination of Latin as the first foreign language. Considerable time, which formerly was given in the Latin class to the acquisition of grammatical nomenclature, has now to be used in the German class with resulting slower progress.

There is now little dispute about the elementary or second year examination. Teachers are pretty well agreed as to what can be attained in two years of high school study. There is usually some easy concrete prose passage to be translated from German into English, and the other questions are clearly designed to test knowledge of inflections and of simple syntax rather than of a large working vocabulary.

On the whole, the selections to be translated into English are well chosen. They are concrete, form a thought unit and are not above the mentality of the high school pupil. The heading usually tells the candidate what to expect and is a distinct help.

Whether a word may fairly be expected to be known, cannot be answered abstractly. In one context it may be unfair, in

¹ A paper prepared for the annual meeting of the New York State Modern Language Association held at Albany, November 24, 1919.

another perfectly legitimate. For example, some might argue that the meanings should be given of *Erwachsene*, *mitteidig*, *bescheiden*,² *Landgut*³ and *demütig*.⁴ But *Erwachsene* is used in contrast to *Kinder*, and *demütig* in opposition to *stolz* and ought, therefore, to be guessed by the candidate.

Sometimes the meaning of a phrase is clear enough, but its exact and idiomatic rendering is not so easy to find. Such difficult phrases are for example: *das Fest verherrlichen*,⁵ *der dir die Stunden verkürzen soll*, *einen fröhlichen Morgengruss bringen*,⁶ *die herrliche Frühlingsluft tief einatmend*.⁷ In the last paper, cognizance seems to have been taken of this real difficulty, when *für den Notfall* is rendered *for a rainy day*.⁸

It is encouraging to see that the examiner has avoided selecting passages from the texts widely used in secondary schools. The selection is in each case a genuine sight-passage for all. In several cases he has also wisely taken liberties with the text by simplifying difficult idiomatic expressions or omitting them altogether. There is no object in preserving the exact wording of the original text.

When we come to the grammatical questions, we can best see the tremendous strides that have been made within the last ten years.

In June 1909, we still have such familiar questions, as:

1. Give, with reason, the case of each of the four of the following (taken from the passage set for translation):
Schrittes, Weges, dem, ihm, Blicke, Netz.
2. Explain the syntax of two of the following:
abgegangen seien, hätte gefischt, hinunterzustürzen.
3. Conjugate, in the singular, four of the following:
vorgefallen in the present indicative; *versunken* in the imperfect subjunctive active; *anfang* in the perfect indicative passive; *kam* in the future perfect subjunctive (!); *sich trennt* in the imperfect indicative; *denken* in the pluperfect subjunctive active.

² January, 1917.

³ June, 1917.

⁴ June, 1919.

⁵ January, 1918.

⁶ June, 1918.

⁷ January, 1919.

⁸ June, 1919.

4. Write, with the definite article, the genitive singular and the nominative plural of:
Sohn, Narr, Turm, Sonne.
5. Explain the position of *habe, kann, wird.*
6. Give the principal parts of *hinweggeritten, achtend, geschehen, vergass, kann, stehn, ertragen.*
7. State the tense, mood and voice of: *wiedergekommen sein, sei geworden, wird belohnt.*

This type of question continues to January 1912, when the eye is arrested by two questions put in German:

1. Schreiben Sie die Grundformen (Hauptzeiten) von: *stand, verdorben, bitte, trage.*
2. Deklinieren Sie: (a) *das dürftige Aussehen* in der Einzahl (im Singular), (b) *grosse dunkle Augen* in der Mehrzahl (im Plural). Formal Grammar asked in German marks no real progress.

However, one question on this paper actually startles one: "Write the German dictation printed on separate sheet (to be read by the teacher)."

Here is the first real recognition of oral work. Here is something that looks like the dawn of a new era in modern language teaching. But to our great surprise, this so promising innovation is dropped on the very next paper never to appear again. Instead of it, the following legend appears at the head of the examination of June 1912:

"Students instructed by teachers whose work in the oral use of the language has been approved by the State Education Department may omit question 7.⁹ Credit for oral work will not be granted unless an itemized certification on a separate sheet is attached to the answer-paper."

"This separate sheet provides for ten credits for dictation and ten credits for oral reading. In January 1917, the certification on a separate sheet is dispensed with and the directions now read:

"Credit for oral work may be added on the answer-paper directly to the mark obtained in the written examination."

It is very much to be regretted that the dictation was not given a longer trial and developed along the lines established at Columbia College by the late William Addison Hervey. If there is any virtue in having all the other types of questions reread at

⁹ Question 7 is a series of English passages to be translated into German.

Albany, there is no reason why the requirement should not apply in the case of the dictation. If to the dictation were added the ability to retell in English a simple German anecdote read by the examiner and the proficiency to answer in German simple questions based on another anecdote, oral work would be placed at the forefront of modern language instruction and a long step be taken toward its standardization.

The paper of June 1912 continues the innovations of January of the same year (which are really of no moment) by asking stereotyped syntax and grammar questions in German; but two items really reveal an entirely new orientation. These are:

1. Schreiben Sie auf deutsch in Briefform eine Antwort auf die folgende kurze Einladung. (Then follows a short invitation in about three lines.)
2. Schreiben Sie fünf deutsche Sätze, und gebrauchen Sie in jedem derselben eines der folgenden Verben:
(a) *aufstehen* im Präsens, (b) *aufgehen* im Futurum, (c) *stossen* im Imperfektum, (d) *bleiben* im Perfektum, (e) *liegen* im Plusquamperfektum.

Here is really the first recognition of a direct method, the beginning of free composition. The year 1912 then is memorable in the history of the Regents' examinations in German, and it is not betraying a secret when attention is called to the fact that this same year marks the advent of Mr. W. R. Price as State Supervisor of Modern Language Instruction.

In both papers of the year 1913, an attempt is made to ask questions based on the text set for translation into English:

Folgende Fragen sind auf deutsch zu beantworten:

- (a) Wo ist der Wohnort des Kuckucks?
- (b) Was ist das Gegenteil von *nass*, *hart*?
- (c) Welches Wort im Lesestück ist ein Synonym für *böse*?
- (d) Welche Jahreszeit wird nicht im Lesestück genannt?
- (e) Schreibt man gewöhnlich *lasset*? Wenn nicht, was schreibt man?¹⁰

This method is not continued, probably because of the wretched results obtained, tho it was no doubt suggestive to the teacher.

By January 1915, all the grammar questions are asked in German. The phrase "translate into German" remains as the only English for some occult reason until 1916.

¹⁰ January, 1913.

Completing sentences, putting words and forms in sentences, supplying endings, expressing sentences in indirect discourse and in another tense or voice, become more and more the rule, giving eloquent recognition to the basic principle that the unit in language is the sentence or at least the phrase.

Accordingly, it would be well if such questions as the following be entirely eliminated:

1. Geben Sie den Komparativ und je zwei Formen des Superlativs von: *nah, laut, hoch, rasch, gross*.¹¹
2. Steigern Sie: *viel, kurz, nah, edel*, und geben Sie dann das Gegenteil von diesen Adjektiven.¹²

A more acceptable form is shown in:

Setzen Sie die richtige Superlativ-Form der eingeklammerten Adjektive ein:

- (a) *Im Winter sind die Tage (kalt)* etc.¹³

Instead of asking for the principal parts of isolated verbs, entire sentences should always be given.

Even such a legitimate question as the following had better be eliminated:

Deklinieren Sie (a) in der Einzahl (1) *the new book*, (2) *my new book*, (b) in der Mehrzahl: *all my books*.¹⁴

No amount of declining is worth anything, unless the respective cases can be readily used in sentences.

A very unfortunate relapse is this question:

Schreiben Sie (mit der englischen Bedeutung) sechs Präpositionen, die immer den Akkusativ regieren.¹⁵

Who is not familiar with the pupil who can rattle off the doggerel about the prepositions with the accusative and then blithely writes *durch dem Fenster*. What he needs is not to say more often *durch regiert den Akkusativ*, but *durch ihn, durch die Tür, durch das Fenster*. Of course, it is not insisted that such questions should never be asked in class, tho ideally perhaps they should not, but the question-paper ought to indicate to the teacher those things he should stress most with his pupils. And the asking for

¹¹ June, 1917.

¹² June, 1918.

¹³ January, 1918.

¹⁴ June, 1919.

¹⁵ June, 1919.

comparatives, principal parts and cases governed by prepositions ought to consume a very small part of the time indeed.

There is a danger that the use of the grammatical terms in German will give the teachers the self-sufficient feeling, that they are using a highly progressive, useful and modern method when they spend a whole hour on such questions as:

Was ist der Genitiv von *der Mann*? or Wie heisst der Konjunktiv von *ich war*?

They feel quite proud of themselves for not having used a single word of English during the whole period, and yet their pupils get no nearer a real mastery of the language than if the whole exercise were conducted in English.

With all the stress to be placed on free reproduction and composition, synonyms and antonyms, translation either way cannot be dispensed with. It is the one exercise which 99% of the students will need later in life, if they ever have any call for their linguistic knowledge. The examiner is to be congratulated for not having allowed himself to be swept off his feet by our direct method extremists, who wish all translating tabooed.

When the oral credit was first introduced in June 1912, it was regrettable that translation from English into German was imposed as a sort of penalty on those who were so unfortunate as to have teachers "whose work in the oral use of the language has not been approved by the State Education Department." That regulation placed them at a double disadvantage. Not only did they have an inferior teacher, but they were also required to do what is usually considered the most difficult part of the paper.

This anomalous situation continued until June 1918, when the English passage to be translated into German was placed in Group I, required of all candidates.

Original composition, beyond using German words in sentences, was first recognized in June 1914:

Erzählen Sie auf deutsch, in etwa 40–50 Worten, irgend eine kleine Anekdote.

More precise questions are asked the following year:

1. Beschreiben Sie in zehn deutschen Sätzen in ungefähr 50 Worten, Ihre Heimatstadt oder Ihr Heimatdorf.¹⁶

¹⁶ January, 1915.

2. Erzählen Sie in 14 deutschen Sätzen von mindestens je sechs Worten, was Sie letzten Sommer getan haben.¹⁷

All these questions are good and legitimate, tho it gradually becomes harder to vary them sufficiently, so that the student cannot simply memorize a few set models.

Once or twice helpful suggestions are offered for a suitable subdivision of the topic, e.g.:

Schreiben Sie auf deutsch einen Aufsatz von 75 Wörtern (?) über Ihr Weihnachtsfest, etwa nach folgendem Schema: (a) Ihre Geschenke (b) Ihr Mittagessen (c) Was Sie sonst getan haben.¹⁸

Of course, this type of question must not be overrated. It is really a test in resourcefulness and ingenuity rather than in actual knowledge, and it is quite conceivable that a good, but ambitious student, would fare rather badly, if he thought more of the content of what he wrote, than of the form.

A novel question, but one the possibilities of which are soon exhausted, occurs in the last paper:

In zwölf der folgenden Wörter bezeichnen Sie den Vokal mit- oder ~.¹⁹

It is doubtful whether the pupil may fairly be expected to be able to use: *ausserhalb, innerhalb, von aussen, je . . . desto*; but they occur among 16 expressions from which only ten are to be selected.¹⁹

Too vague is the following:

Geben Sie auf deutsch ein Beispiel von dem Passiv.¹⁹

To summarize then:

There is little fault to be found with the elementary papers and there is noticeable a sane utilization of what is best and most modern in modern language instruction. Their influence can only tend toward better teaching. On the whole, it would also be better if the question-papers were printed in German instead of Roman type. It confuses the student if he sees a word in a different form from that which he has been used to.

In the third and fourth year, things are by their very nature less satisfactory. The chief difference between these years and the second year lies largely in the demand for a larger active and

¹⁷ June, 1915.

¹⁸ January, 1917.

¹⁹ June, 1919.

passive vocabulary. At the end of the second year the average pupil has a working vocabulary of about 2500–3000 words. The range of the active demand on the elementary paper is probably within 1000 words. Hence, even tho the students have used a variety of beginners' books, the common *Wortschatz* of which may not be larger than 200–300 words, still they have supplemented that number by intensive work on reading-matter and in prose-composition books, so that we may possibly assume an additional sum, common to all, of 700 words. This is largely guess-work, but Professor Bagster-Collins once presented some accurate statistics which are, however, not accessible in print.

Now what is the situation at the end of the third year? The pupils have read and more or less digested possibly 200–300 pages of reading-matter and have continued with the rudimentary facts of inflection and syntax. They may have acquired another 1000 words. If 100 teachers were asked to draw up a list of these 1000 words, the probable result would be that only 100 at most would be found on all, while the sum total of all the different words on those 100 lists would amount to at least 10,000.

Or one might select from the vocabularies of the twenty-four texts recommended by Columbia and Barnard for intermediate reading those words which occur (a) in all of them, (b) only once. The result would probably be startling. And this list, compared to what the different publishers recommend for intermediate work, is extremely limited.

The question then is: How is the examiner to select from say 10,000 possible words those which he may fairly expect the pupil to know? And so far, this estimate took into consideration only isolated words. How will it be with idiomatic expressions, where the possible number must run into the hundred thousands? This is really the crux of the problem which confronts every examiner and causes him more *Kopfzerbrechen* than many a passage in Faust.

Fortunately in translating from German into English, the case is not quite so hopeless as it sounds, because of the power of the German language to express new ideas by compounding a relatively small number of stem-words. A boy or a girl of average intelligence can often guess from the context the meaning of a compound not met with before, tho this ability needs to be

developed by special emphasis being placed from the start upon word-formation. But the situation is indeed desperate where the rendering is to be made the other way around. Accordingly, one may take any third or fourth year paper and at random select words and phrases which a pupil may legitimately not know.

Is there any remedy for this unsatisfactory condition of affairs?

Something can be gained by allowing a more liberal choice, but even an option of one out of two does not solve the difficulty. The chances are that the questions are either unfair, or so easy that they should appear on the elementary paper. "*I cannot blame you*" may honorably be missed by a fourth year pupil; "*he has been here only two weeks*,"²⁰ which appears on the same paper should not be too hard for the elementary. It has been suggested that the papers be submitted in advance to a large board of practical teachers for comment and criticism, but that does not strike at the root of the evil. Each teacher would simply object to the words and phrases with which his students are unfamiliar, and the result would be an elementary paper.

A real solution would be found in the creation of a definite canon of words and phrases, to be drawn up by a representative committee of the New York State Modern Language Association or better yet of the National Federation. In that way some continuity would be brought into modern language work, when students pass from high school to college, and teachers and pupils would see a much more definite task before them. There would be less blind groping and less bootless "rapid" reading. It is discouraging to have worked painstakingly thru several texts and then on the examination get material with an entirely different vocabulary. With a word and phrase list, it must of course, still be understood that a live vocabulary can be acquired largely thru a study of connected texts; but there can be no harm in adding to one's vocabulary by taking up disconnected words, provided they are worked over systematically and according to categories. What I have in mind, is something like Ploetz, *Vocabulaire systématique*, or Krüger, *Systematic English Vocabulary*, *Englisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch nach Stoffen geordnet*, which stands the Germans in such good stead in acquiring a speaking knowledge

²⁰ January, 1919.

of French or English. It would not be hard to agree under each category what words and phrases belong to second, third or fourth year respectively.

The other alternative would be for the Regents to prescribe certain texts for intensive study, something on the plan of the English reading list of the College Entrance Board. Such prescription would probably be less popular than the word and phrase book, particularly as not all words and phrases of any given text are worth while remembering, and an element of uncertainty would be at once introduced.

There ought to be some prescriptions as to subject matter. If these are not altogether scientifically obtainable, then they must be more or less arbitrarily arrived at. Sanely made, they will help the colleges and be a godsend to high school teachers and pupils alike. There is no reason why the Regents should not prescribe for third and fourth year the knowledge of certain facts in German history and geography and of biographical data about some of the great German poets. If a representative committee of the State Association made detailed recommendations, the Regents would accept them only too gladly.

What was said in detail about the second year papers applies in large part to those of the third.

There is little quarrel with the selections to be translated into English. Since 1909, when a passage was taken from Wilhelm Tell, nothing but genuine sight-passages has appeared.

Whether a pupil may be expected to render idiomatically the following phrases is at least open to doubt:

1. Die Adler vollführen ihre Kreisbewegungen²¹
2. mit dem mich in Gedanken eine enge Freundschaft verband²²
3. er hat weiter gewirkt auf mich und durch mich²²
4. dass mir Hören und Sehen verging²³
5. fragte bestürzt²⁴
6. meine bodenlose Schlechtigkeit²⁵
7. Der Schauplatz meiner Kindheit ist mir noch deutlich vor Augen.²⁶

²¹ June, 1915.

²² January, 1916.

²³ January, 1917.

²⁴ June, 1917.

²⁵ January, 1918.

²⁶ January, 1919.

Nothing would have been lost if these expressions had been ruthlessly simplified.

It is the hardest thing in the world so to phrase your questions that they will be understood by candidates who have not been your pupils. Every teacher has a certain routine-way of asking questions and a new type, particularly if it is put in German, is apt to bewilder. Here too, there has been a steady advance toward definiteness and precision.

The following question seems altogether too indefinite:

Bilden Sie je einen deutschen Satz von mindestens fünf Worten mit jedem der folgenden Verben: *einschlafen, spazieren gehen, sich erinnern, zerreißen, aufgehen, anbieten*.²⁷

If a wise boy used all of these in the future tense, he would not need to worry about principal parts or separable prefixes.

The very next paper corrects this vagueness:

Bilden Sie je einen deutschen Satz von mindestens sechs Worten mit jedem der folgenden Verben (a) im Imperfektum mit *beten, anbieten, bitten*, (b) im Perfektum mit *aufstehen, verstehen, bestehen*.

The less desirable form occurs again three years later.

Gebrauchen Sie in deutschen Sätzen: *ermüden, befreien, entlaufen, gefallen*.²⁸

Beginning with June 1918, a choice is allowed, tho not always enough leeway is permitted: Five out of six, in one question; five out of ten in another. If a choice of from five out of ten to five out of twenty were allowed, much hostile criticism would be silenced. Teachers could with some show of justice contend that after three years of German, a pupil might not have run across: *Anspruch machen auf* or *sich beziehen auf*.²⁹ If these were simply possible choices out of a fairly large number, nobody could object.

With January 1918, this additional direction is added after the list of words to be used in German sentences: "Übersetzen Sie diese Sätze ins Englische." This seems almost an absolute necessity, for even the best students cannot always construct sentences in such a way that the meaning of a word will become clear from the context. The candidate should also be

²⁷ January, 1915.

²⁸ January, 1918.

²⁹ June, 1916.

told that he must not use the same noun, verb or adjective more than once.

It is doubtful whether a third year pupil can: define in German *Kasino* or *die Gleichheit*, give synonyms for *begrenzt* and *plaudernd*, think of the opposite of *Freiheit*,³⁰ or whether he can use in a sentence *eifersüchtig auf* or *achten auf*.³¹ A more liberal choice would take care of this difficulty.

The translation of English into German seems fair on the whole. Too hard appear such phrases as:

1. *After thinking the matter over, he came to the conclusion*³²
2. *I am looking forward to this trip*³³
3. *I have not neglected my work*³⁴
4. *looking imploringly*³⁵
5. *She . . . found her greatest delight in discussing the latest books.*³⁶

The word *Irishman* is not necessarily in the student's vocabulary, nor *prescribe*, *testimonials*,³⁷ nor *stature*.³⁸

It is probably a safe assumption that even on the intermediate paper, the prose composition serves not so much as a test in vocabulary as in the correct use of inflections and the less elementary syntactical constructions. Accordingly, it may well be simple in its vocabulary and go only a little beyond the range of the elementary paper.

The original composition themes all seem fair and suited to the age and viewpoint of the pupils. When directions are given in English,³⁹ the task is really harder than when the question reads:⁴⁰

Führen Sie folgende Andeutungen in einer Erzählung von 125 Wörtern (?) aus: *Sich in einer fremden Stadt befinden. Manne*

³⁰ June, 1918.

³¹ June, 1919.

³² January, 1915.

³³ June, 1915.

³⁴ June, 1916.

³⁵ January, 1917.

³⁶ June, 1917.

³⁷ January, 1918.

³⁸ June, 1918.

³⁹ June, 1914.

⁴⁰ January, 1919.

auf der Strasse begegnen. Ihn bitten, den Weg nach dem Bahnhof zu zeigen. Die Strassenbahn nehmen, dahin fahren. Fahrkarte am Schalter lösen. In die Zughalle eintreten. Abteil zweiter Klasse suchen. Einsteigen. Gepäck ins Netz tun. Alles in Ordnung. Fertig. Der Zug fährt. Die Reise. Die Ankunft.

But little needs to be said about the fourth year papers. They are the most unsatisfactory for all concerned—student, teacher and examiner. This is presumably so, because by the end of four years the individual aptitudes of the students begin to show a great divergence. For various reasons, many pupils do not seem to progress much beyond the third year. They have so much trouble to retain in their poor memories what they have learned before, that they acquire little more.

In selecting a fourth year passage for translation into English, an examiner is tempted to take one, the thought-content of which is beyond the range of the average pupil. Fortunately this mistake was made only once, when a passage from Lessing's *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*,⁴¹ dealing with the three unities was given. In general, there is observable a gradual lowering of the demands within the last five years, and the Regents' papers show a better realization of the attainable than the college examinations. It is well not to forget that fourth year is only one year beyond third. Still it is hard to see why as elementary a question as the following should occur at all:⁴²

Gebrauchen Sie in deutschen Sätzen: (a) folgende Formen des Relativpronomens: *dessen, deren, denen, welchem, die*, (b) und folgende Temporalkonjunktionen: *wenn, wann, als, wie, ehe*. A student who cannot do that perfectly at the end of four years of study should not pass at all. Twenty points is too much to allow him for the correct answer and too little to deduct if he fails.

On the other hand, a question like the following is too difficult and the knowledge involved too unprofitable:

*Die Bedeutung mit der Angabe deutscher Beispiele von zwölf der folgenden Vor- oder Nachsilben ist (auf englisch oder deutsch) anzugeben: ent-, er-, ver-, zer-, -heit, -keit, -ei, -er, -nis, -tum, -ig, -lich, -los.*⁴³

⁴¹ January, 1914.

⁴² January, 1919.

⁴³ January, 1919.

In general, more attention in the fourth year should be paid to synonyms and word-formation and to more systematic vocabulary-building.

Once an outline map of Germany with the location of a few cities, mountains and rivers was allowed as an option,⁴⁴ at another time, some still more elementary geographical information.⁴⁵ The showing was probably so poor that this style of question had to be abandoned. Here too, there is room for the more specific prescriptions demanded in an earlier part of this paper.

In summing up, we may say, that the papers for each of the three years show a steady improvement and cannot help having a salutary influence on modern language teaching. The elementary papers are the most satisfactory. Very little more can be done with the third and fourth years, until it is generally realized that without very definite prescriptions as to content and words and phrases, no human being, from the very nature of things, can set papers which are at the same time fair and not too elementary.

Columbia College

⁴⁴ June, 1917.

⁴⁵ January, 1918.